

The Columbia Workshop
Air Raid
Oct 27, 1938

CAST:

VOICE
STUDIO DIRECTOR
THE ANNOUNCER
WOMEN'S VOICES
THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE
THE BOY'S VOICE
GIRLS' VOICES
THE SINGING WOMAN'S VOICE
THE SICK WOMAN'S VOICE
THE YOUNG MAN'S VOICE
THE GIRL'S VOICE
MEN'S VOICES
THE VOICE OF THE SERGEANT

VOICE:
When you hear the gong sound . . .
The time will be . . .
Ten seconds past two A.M. precisely. . . .

(gong signal)

VOICE:
WABC . . . New York. . . .

STUDIO DIRECTOR:
Ladies and gentlemen:
You have only one thought tonight all of you

You who fish the fathoms of the night
With poles on roof-tops and long loops of wire

Those of you who driving from some visit
Finger the button on the dashboard dial
Until the metal trembles like a medium in a trance
And tells you what is happening in France
Or China or in Spain or some such country

You have one thought tonight and only one:
Will there be war? Has war come?
Is Europe burning from the Tiber to the Somme?

You think you hear the sudden double thudding of the drum

You don't though . . .

Not now . . .

But what your ears will hear within the hour
No one living in this world would try to tell you.
We take you there to wait it for yourselves.

Stand by: we'll try to take you through. . . .

(The station cuts out: there is a moment's delay: it cuts in again.)

STUDIO DIRECTOR:

One moment now: we'll try to take you.

The ultimatum you remember was for sunrise by their clock:
Midnight by ours. Now ours is long past midnight.

The sun is up on the whole curve of that continent.

The weather is fair with winds southwest going southerly:
A few clouds at ten thousand – cumulus:
Mists among the passes of the upper Julian Alps:
Some fog on the east Baltic but lifting:

Otherwise sun: the Tyrrhenian Sea all sunshine:
The Adriatic creased with curling light.

The Atlantic tumbles forward into morning on those beaches.

The whole continent lolls in summer sunlight:
Spain is drifting eastward with the shapes of clouds:
France is smooth with morning as a turf:
Germany is checkered with the squares of green and grain:

The visibility is perfect. . . .

You think you hear the lonely droning danger of the planes

You don't though . . .

Not yet. . . .

(The station cuts out: cuts in again.)

STUDIO DIRECTOR:

One moment now we'll take you through.

We take you to a town behind the border –
One of those old-time hill-towns where the papers
Come tomorrow morning and the wars
Come years ago or in some other country:

The planes will come though – if they come at all:

The pass above the border is to eastward in those mountains.

Our men are on a roof above the houses of the town.

Strange and curious times these times we live in:
You watch from kitchens for the bloody signs:
You watch for breaking war above the washing on the lines.

In the old days they watched along the borders:
They called their warfare in the old days wars
And fought with men and men who fought were killed:

We call it peace and kill the women and the children.

Our women die in peace beneath the lintels of their doors.

We have learned much: civilization has gentled us:
We have learned to take the dying and the wounds without the wars.

Stand by please: we take you through now. . . .

(The "note" of the station changes: the Studio Director's voice falls away
as he speaks. At the end it is almost lost.)

We take you now across the traveler's sea

Across the trawler's coast

the parson's orchard

Across the merchant's villa with the vine above the porch

Across the laborer's city with the flames above the forges

Across the drover's plain

the planter's valley. . . .

The poplar trees in alleys are the roads

The linden trees in couples are the doors

The willows are the wandering water flowing

The pines in double lines are where the north wind burns the orchards

Those are the mountains where no meadow is squared nor a
Stream straight: nor a road: nor water quiet

The town is in those mountains: you are there

(The station cuts out: there cuts in the undefined murmur and clatter and
laughing of a waking town on a fine summer day.)

THE ANNOUNCER: (flat: dry)

You are twenty-eight miles from the eastern border:
You are up on top of a town on a kind of tenement:
You are out the other side the night –
The sun dazzles you: not the light-bulb.
You are staring out to eastward toward the sun.

We have seen nothing and heard nothing:
Before dawn we thought we heard them:
It was wind we heard in the valley cedars.

Sounds rise to this roof –
Hoofs of stabled horses: leaves:
Even the speaking of sleepers rises.
Many sleep in the one house here:
They work in the fields: sleep in the village:
The men go out at dawn: return
To evening burning from the chimneys:
The women keep the town between.

(Under the Announcer's voice have been rising the voices of women: gay:
laughing: the words indistinguishable.)

They keep it now: the tenement's full of them –
A four-story building of women:
They're filling the court with their quick talk:
They call back and forth from the windows:
They laugh behind the kitchen doors:
They rinse the shirts in the first real shine of the morning:
They talk – their arms to elbows in the tubs –

WOMEN'S VOICES:
Who did she say?

When did she say so? . . .

. . . Look at it!

Look at the cuff of his shirt! What's he been into?
Black grease!

What would you think he'd be into –
A man like yours with an eye like his for wandering.

And you to talk! – you with that red-headed lollypop!
Hardly a day at dark but his head's in the window.

He's wearing his elbows out on the stone sill
Looking us over from one floor to the next:
If it's only the eye with him that wanders I wonder. . . .

AN OLD WOMAN'S VOICE:
A fine day I told him: a fine day:
A fine willing day: he could trust it for certain:

He could hay today and cock it tomorrow for certain.
Ah those arctic stars he said . . .

A BOY'S VOICE (calling)

Harry!

Harry! Be quick Harry! Be quick! Quick!

THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE:

Men are the fools: they have no trust in the world:
To make a crop of hay you're bound to trust it:
There's no sin but not to trust the world.

GIRLS' VOICES:

When will she marry?

She won't marry:

He's always planning for something or other:
He's always fearing or hoping or something.

They never seem to know it's now –
Men don't: women sometimes do.

They're always waiting for the time
They've waited for.

And when it comes

They still wait.

Don't they?

But they do.

They never take the clock for now –
For this – for here. They never take the
Risk that this was why they waited.

Men don't: women sometimes do.

No: not sometimes: always do.

Life's more like itself for us than
Them. They're always meddling with it –
Always making life come true. . . .

(Over the laughter and the voices a woman's voice, very high and clear and
pure, singing a scale – Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! . . .)

WOMEN'S VOICES:

It's war again! Have you heard them talking?

We've heard them.

How can we help but hear them – blabbing about:
Cocking their feet on the kitchen table and talking.

It's always war when they talk and it's always talk.

It's always talk when they get to the beer and tobacco.

The beer comes out of the bottles: so does the talk too.

Yes and the wars!

Wasting their time on wars with the
Dishes to do and the children to chasten.

The wars!

As though to make the wars were something wonderful!
Millions of men have made the wars and talked.

Talking of wars as though to die were something!

Death's the one thing every creature does
And none does well I've ever seen – the one thing
Weak and foolish every creature does.

Only boys and men like boys believe in it.

It's sticking to this giddy world that's hard –
Not turning limp and letting loose and tumbling.

THE BOY'S VOICE:

Harry! Harry! Harry! Be quick Harry!

GIRLS' VOICES:

Ah the petticoat! Look at the petticoat Maudie!
Look at the petticoat will you! Isn't it hers?

Who would wear it but her? But who? – who?

Who but my mother!

Who but her mother!

(The girls' voices pick up a chanting beat which works into a kind of
tuneless tune.)

GIRLS' VOICES: Who but her mother and where will she wear it to?

Who will she show it to?

Where will she go in it?

Where will she go in the silk of her petticoat?

Who will she show the silk in her petticoat?

How would he know it was silk in her petticoat?

How would he know?

How would he know. . . .

(There is a shriek of laughter. The chant and the words are repeated indistinguishably under the Announcer's voice. They fade to a murmur of voices.)

THE ANNOUNCER:

We have seen nothing and heard nothing.
If they left at dawn we should have heard them.
It's two hours now since dawn.
They could make it in two: they could make it under —
One and a half from their fields to the border:
Ten minutes more . . .

(A tinny piano begins far off — a few indistinguishable phrases of summer morning music . . . "Summer Time" or "Dead End Blues.")

We have seen
Nothing at all. We have heard nothing.
The town is very quiet and orderly.
They are flushing the cobblestones with water.
The sidewalks are slippery with sun.
It smells of a summer morning anywhere:
It smells of seven o'clock in the morning in
Any town they water dust in.
Towns are all the same in summer.
A man can remember the name of his own in
Any city after the water carts.

(The woman's voice rises again in the high, pure scale.)

The last shutters are opening —
The rooms where no one hopes: the rooms
Where all the hope's been had and sleep
Covers it: folding it. Rooms where the old lie:
Rooms where the young lie late with their lovers . . .

A SICK WOMAN'S VOICE: (close: weak: wandering.)
How much longer must I wait? They've told you.

A BOY'S VOICE:

Wait for what mother? Wait to be well?

THE SICK WOMAN'S VOICE:

Wait to be. . . . Yes. Not long. . . . A day is long. ...
It's always long the first time. I remember
Someone saying it was always long. . . .
Someone saying it will come: don't fear it. . . .

THE BOY'S VOICE:

Were you never afraid mother?

THE SICK WOMAN'S VOICE:

Never: of anything.
There's nothing comes by day or night to fear.

THE BOY'S VOICE:

Not even war? Not even if they came here?

THE SICK WOMAN'S VOICE:

They came when I was young once: I remember them.
We smelled the smoke one morning in the alders. . . .
They had their tents by the stream in the water-meadow . . .
I'd never eat the sausages. I was the dainty one:
I used to rinse my things in seven waters -
Well-water: brook-water: rain. . . .
I dried them on the gravel by the river.
Even at night late they would smell of the sun on them. . . .
I ate the watercress to make my mouth sweet. . . .
They had blue capes on their coats with scarlet linings:
They spoke together in another tongue:
They were slow and soft in their speech with laughter and looking. . . .
Evenings coming home across the evening:
Seeing the constellations of the stars:
They gave us milk to drink from jars of metal.

You sit in the dark and drink: you don't say anything.

THE BOY'S VOICE:

They kill the children when they come. I've read it.

THE SICK WOMAN'S VOICE:

Not "It's a pleasant night." Not even "Thank you."
They seem to want you not to speak or move:
They seem to want you quiet like the heifers:
You sit in the dark and rest: you don't say anything. . . .
You don't say "Thank you" even . . . not "Good night."

THE BOY'S VOICE:

I've heard they kill the children mother! I've heard it.
I've heard at night in sleep they kill the children!

(Under the close voices of the Sick Woman and the Boy: under the murmur of the women in the courtyard comes the slow: low: barely audible pulsing of a plane swelling and lapsing.)

THE SICK WOMAN'S VOICE:

A day is longer . . . I was very young:
Everyone coming and looking and Isn't she young . . .

You sit in the dark and rest: you don't say anything . . .

THE ANNOUNCER:

Listen! Motor throbbing!
Probably one of their own.
No one watching it anyway.

THE YOUNG MAN'S VOICE:

Stay with this sunlight on your shoulders:
Stay with this sunlight on your hair.

THE ANNOUNCER:

We've lost him this time.

(Over the voices of the lovers and the faint lapsing drone of the plane comes the Singing Woman's voice in a high clear scale: rising: descending.)

Wait!

Wait! We've got him! He's doubled!
He's doubling back into sun:
He's running her east for the border . . .
Orders from somewhere certainly!

They've heard something or guessed it . . .

He was west of the town when he banked:
He yanked her round on a wing
Like swinging a colt on a bridle:
He's east of us now in the hills.

They've found something . . . or feared it!

(A siren sounds at a distance like a hoarse parody of the Singing Woman's voice: rising, shrieking, descending. It is repeated under the voices, nearer and louder.)

THE ANNOUNCER:

They've found it!

Feared and found!

There's the siren: the signal:
They've picked them up at the border . . .

THE BOY'S VOICE: (shouting)

Harry! Where are you Harry! Where are you! Where are you!

THE ANNOUNCER: (dry and quick over the siren)

Ten minutes to wait.

If they're cruising a hundred and eighty it's
Ten minutes: if less
More: if more less.
Ten we'd guess if we had to.
Depends how old they bring them.
The slow ones hobble the fast.

(The siren rises to a crescendo.)

Probably bringing the lot of them.

Strike at a king you must kill: -
You strike in sleep at a king
When you strike by trick at a people.
The treacherous wars must be quick
Or the victims live for the victory.

(The siren dies rapidly away: the voices of the women have been rising under it.)

WOMEN'S VOICES:
Thank God that's over.

Fit to deafen a woman.

Fit to deafen the cattle for twenty miles
And what for? For a war! To say there's another.

What's a war to us - there's always another.

All that noise to tell us there's a war.

Schoolboys banging the bells and blowing the bugles.

THE ANNOUNCER: (women's voices under)
Eight minutes more.

Town quiet: waiting:
Women's skirts in the court:
Women's arms in the windows:
Women's talk on the stair ...

They lean there careless and talking:
Their shawls are bright in the doors:
The morning air's in their aprons:
They shape their hair with their hands:
They stand there softly and simply.

The women lean from the stairs.

WOMEN'S VOICES:
They're always waking us up for a war somewhere.
Get up! they say. We're at war!

It's no news!
Thousands of years they've been saying it.

Crazy government!
Can't they run the country decent and quiet till
Eight in the morning even? The rest of the day
They can rule as loud as they like and as long as they mind to.
They can do what they want with the country from eight on.
Only till eight if they'd wait for the difficult sleepers -
Those that count their heartbeats every hour.

(A police whistle blows at a distance: there are distant excited men's voices.)

A WOMAN'S VOICE:

A woman's got no time to watch the wars -
Scrubbing the kitchens Tuesdays: marrying Mondays:
Bearing and burying - men to be born and to bury:
People dying never died before . . .

(The whistle is nearer. The shouting men's voices become intelligible - some far: some nearer.)

MEN'S VOICES:

Air Raid!

Air Raid!

Air Raid!

Air Raid!

The bombers!

The bombers!

The bombers!

The bombers!

THE ANNOUNCER:

A police sergeant: he's shouting:
He's marching down through the street:
He's beating the shutters and shouting:
He's calling them out - "the cellars!"
Listen - "Take to the cellars!"
"Take to the church cellars!"
They only laugh: they lean from the
Open windows and laugh at him.

WOMEN'S VOICES:

You take the cellars!

You can take them Sergeant!

Let the town policemen take the cellars!

They'll smell the mice in the cellars!

Maybe they'll catch them!

(The police whistle blows sharply.)

THE VOICE OF THE SERGEANT: (pompous: shouting)

The alarm has been given. Five minutes have passed.

In five minutes more they must be here.
They are coming in numbers: I do not know how many.
The instructions are to occupy the vaults.
These are the orders of persons of proper authority.
You will march to the church by twos and at suitable intervals.

WOMEN'S VOICES:

Will we? And who'll be watching the pot while we're squatting there
Counting the mother spiders? The police?

There are frogs in the vaults.

There are also people's relations –
Not the kind that care to gossip either.

And who will iron the underwear now that it's sprinkled?

Oh the police will . . .

THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE:

Listen to me policeman!
Perhaps it's true they're coming in their planes:
Perhaps it isn't true. But if it is
It's not for housewives in this town they're coming.
They're after the generals: they're after the cabinet ministers.
They're coming to capture the square in the capital city.
They always have: they always capture the city.
A fine sight we'd be – a parcel of housewives
Spinning with the spiders in a hole
While soldiers that don't know the hole is there
Or we are there or anything is there
Go running through the wonderful great sky
Hunting before and after for that city!

THE ANNOUNCER:

Six minutes gone.
Four more as we figure it.
If they picked them up to the right
We'll sight them over the river:
Horizon flat to the flight:
Rising or seeming to rise
As geese do coming inland.
Blur of light on the fins . . .

THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE:

We're women. No one's making war on women –
The nation with no land: without history:
The nation whose dates are Sunday and Monday: the nation
Bounded by bread and sleep – by giving birth:
By taking death to keep: the ancient nation
Settled in the seasons of this earth as
Leaves are and oblivious as leaves:
Neutral as summer in the fierce divisions . . .

WOMEN'S VOICES:

They're always marching past to capture something!

It's all one if they march or they fly: they won't hurt us!

It's all one to us if they wing or they walk!

They've never troubled us yet!

They've never harmed us!

THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE:

They never will. You are a new policeman.
Less than ten years you have been in this district.
I do not mention this to shame you: only
You do not know the history of this neighborhood.
We have seen such people in this place before.
They come in uniforms carrying elegant banners.
They march up and down. They ruin roads.
They interfere with the cattle. They rob the fruit trees.
They frighten calving cows. They trample clover.
No one would say they were likable people for visitors –
Making history over the corn and the cabbage:
Writing glorious pages in the beans:
Disturbing serious men in haying season.
Nevertheless it is true that few have suffered –
Maybe a girl would be rumpled a little . . .

(There is a guffaw of women's laughter.)

not many.

THE VOICE OF THE SERGEANT:

I do not say the order was expedient.
I say it was issued. I do not account for orders.
It is not my duty to account for orders.
Nevertheless it was issued by men of experience:
Persons of sound sense. It may have been thought
The wars have changed with the world and not for the better!

(There is a burst of jeering laughter, the voice of the Sergeant rising above it.)

It may have been thought: this enemy kills women!

(The laughter increases.)

It may have been thought: this enemy kills women
Meaning to kill them!

(The laughter rises to a shriek.)

I say it may be thought
He makes his wars on women!

(The laughter drops sharply away.)

 It may be thought
This enemy is not the usual enemy!
That this one is no general in a greatcoat
Conquering countries for the pride and praise:
That this one conquers other things than countries!

(There is dead silence.)

It may be thought that this one conquers life!
That life that won't be conquered can be killed!
That women are most lifelike! That he kills them!

It may be as I say. It may be thought he
Makes his wars on women . . . It is possible.

(The women's voices rise again in a great shriek of laughter. Over the
laughter, clear and lifting and lovely as laughter itself rises the Singing
Woman's scale. Under it, dull, heavy, flat come soft explosions.)

WOMEN'S VOICES:
It's an ogre is coming!

 The devil is after us!

Hide in the church from the devil!

 I know him -
I've seen his face in the photographs. Oh but he's fierce!

THE ANNOUNCER: (low and close)
Listen ...

A WOMAN'S VOICE:
He gets his photograph taken and sent around!

THE ANNOUNCER:
Anti-aircraft!

A WOMAN'S VOICE:
He gets his photograph made in his belt and his buttons!

THE ANNOUNCER:
We can't see it: we hear it.

A WOMAN'S VOICE:
He gets his photograph made at the big parades!

THE ANNOUNCER: Wait. There's a burst. There's another.

A WOMAN'S VOICE:

He gets his photograph made with his fist stuck out!

THE ANNOUNCER:

The first was the farther: they're nearing.

A WOMAN'S VOICE:

And his chin stuck out!

THE ANNOUNCER:

Another: nearer: another.

A WOMAN'S VOICE:

And his chest stuck out!

THE ANNOUNCER:

They follow each other like footsteps.

The steel stamps on the sky: the

Heel hits . . .

They hang like

Quills driven in sky: -

The quarry invisible . . .

(An explosion is clearly heard.)

Nearer . . .

(The police whistle blows sharply. Under the voices the explosions are always louder. Under the explosions the inaudible vibration of many planes swells painfully into heavy suffocating sound.)

THE VOICE OF THE SERGEANT:

You can hear for yourselves! You will now follow the orders -

To occupy the vaults of village churches:

In any event to descend from upper floors and

Scatter in streets avoiding visible gatherings . . .

WOMEN'S VOICES:

They're coming.

I hear them.

They're nearer.

A GIRL'S VOICE: (frightened)

They're nearer!

A WOMAN'S VOICE:

Ah they'll go over. There's nothing to fear: they'll go over.

They always do: they go over. Don't you fear.

Don't you fret. Don't you peer in the air - they'll

Go. They will. You'll forget they were ever by Saturday.

THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE:

Dukes: Kings: Emperors - now there's this kind.
They're all fools - the lot of them: always were:
Marching around with their drums: shooting their guns off!
Let them step till they stop if it gives them pleasure.
It's all one to us if they do or they don't.
We needn't crick our necks to watch it ...

(The roar of the planes increases in slow oppressive crescendo. The explosions are no longer heard.)

THE ANNOUNCER:

We hear them: we can't see them.

We hear the shearing metal:
We hear the tearing air.

All we see is sun.

Sun: the hawk's ambush.

Their flight is from the sun.

They might be low: they might be
Well down - three thousand.
They might be less.

 They are many:
Hard to guess how many . . .

(rapidly)
We've got them now: we see them:
They're out of the dazzle: they're flying
Fighting formation in column
Squadron following squadron
Ten - fifteen squadrons
Bombing models mostly
Big ones: three motors . . .

Not so low as we figured them . . .

Almost over . . .

(The roar of the planes breaks: rises sharply in pitch: diminishes: the women's voices above it.)

WOMEN'S VOICES:

 Look!

Look! Look! Look!

THE ANNOUNCER: (rapidly)
They're changing formation they're banking
The whole flight is banking
Front wheeling to flank

Flank anchored and climbing
Climbing bank into line . . .

The line swung like a lariat!

WOMEN'S VOICES:
Look! It's circling as a bird does!

It circles as a hawk would circle hunting!

It's hunting us under the roof: the room: the curtain!

THE ANNOUNCER:
They're wheeling round for the town
They're rounding in by the river
They're giving it throttle they're climbing
The timing is perfect they're flying with
Perfect precision of timing
Perfect mechanical certainty . . .

WOMEN'S VOICES:
Show it our skirts!

 Show it our shawls!

All of us: into the street all of us!

THE ANNOUNCER:
They turn like stones on a string:
They swing like steel in a groove:
They move like tools not men:
You'd say there were no men:
You'd say they had no will but the
Will of motor on metal . . .

(The roar of the planes increases from moment to moment.)

WOMEN'S VOICES:
Show it our skirts in the street: it won't hurt us!

Show it our softness! Show it our weakness!

Show it our womanhood!

 Into the street!

Into the street all of us!

 All of us!

(The pitch of the roar opens: the sound is huge, brutal, close.)

THE ANNOUNCER:
They swing: the wing dips:

There's the signal: the dip: they'll
Dive: they're ready to dive:
They're steady: they're heading down:
They're dead on the town: they're nosing:
They're easing over: they're over:
There they go: there they -

(A crazy stammering of machine guns hammers above the rising roar.)

A WOMAN'S VOICE: (shrieking)
It's us do you see!

A WOMAN'S VOICE: (shrieking)
It's us don't you see us!

(For an instant the shrieking voices of the women, the shattering noise of the guns and the huge scream of the planes are mingled, then the voices are gone and the guns are gone and the scream of the planes closes to a deep sustained music note level and long as silence. After a moment comes the Boy's voice rising on each word, breaking off.)

THE BOY'S VOICE:
Harry! Harry! Harry! . . .

(The diminishing music note again - level - long.)

THE VOICE OF THE YOUNG MAN:
Stay as you are: do not move:
Do not ever move . . .

(The diminishing music note again. Over it the voice of the Singing Woman rising in a slow screaming scale of the purest agony broken at last on the unbearably highest note. The diminishing drone of the planes fades into actual silence.)

THE END